

Lydia Bradley

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“Dedicated to the memory of my beloved Tobias S. Bradley, and our deceased children, by Lydia Bradley”. This sentence is displayed on the campus at Bradley University, arguably one of Lydia Bradley’s greatest achievements. Lydia Bradley had an immense impact on the city of Peoria due to her beneficiary nature, her hard-working spirit, and her keen business sense.

Lydia Bradley lived in Peoria with her husband, Tobias Bradley. Seven days before their thirtieth wedding anniversary, in 1867, Tobias Bradley’s horse-drawn carriage overturned, resulting in his untimely death. Contrary to his wife’s interests, he had not produced a will at the time of his death. By the time his wealth was rightly awarded to Lydia Bradley, she had reconsidered the idea of creating an orphanage. After his death, she decided to hire respected Peorian lawyer W.W. Hammond to aid and advise her. Over several years she increased her fortune from \$500,000 dollars to one million dollars. At this time in history, being a single female businesswoman was not the easiest thing to do. Some suspect that it is for this reason that she married Edward E. Clark, her second husband. Lydia Bradley insisted on a prenuptial agreement to protect her investments; she was the first woman in the nation to do so. After a short time, the couple had a friendly divorce, and Ms. Bradley never looked back.

In 1892, Lydia Bradley acquired controlling interest in Parson’s Horological School in LaPorte, Indiana. She relocated this establishment, the first of its kind, to Peoria, and associated it with the Peoria Watch Company. Pleased by the making of her

first learning establishment, Bradley filed the idea of a larger school into the back of her mind. In addition to this accomplishment, she also aided in the creation of the Order of Saint Francis Medical Center, or OSF. The 'Sisters of the Order of St. Francis' came to Peoria to make a hospital. Lydia, interested in the project, offered them her property, the Isaac Underhill estate. The facility was called Bradley Hospital until her donation was returned, and the building renamed. Now it is one of downstate Illinois' biggest medical facilities. Equally astonishing is the tale of Peoria Park District. Lydia Bradley noticed the appalling lack of recreational areas for families, and decided to change that situation. When her large donation of land did not force the board to leap into action, she increased the acreage to 130, dangling the opportunity in front of their noses. The board was unable to resist, and the Peoria Park District was born. Bradley stipulated that a minimum of \$5,000 be spent each year on improvements and upkeep for the various parks, one of them being Laura Bradley Park, named after her late daughter. Additionally, the First National Bank of Peoria was, at one point, headed by Lydia Bradley. After Tobias Bradley passed away, the bank invited her to take his place as president. She gracefully accepted the offer, and embraced her new duties with the passion that was her signature. Bradley was the first woman in the nation to be the president of a bank, and certainly, she did not allow her gender to hinder her progress. At one point, she was presented with a record of the bank's finances for the month, and replied that while it was not exemplary, she could not expect them to do any better. Furthermore, Ms. Bradley was very interested in the West Bluff area of Peoria. She bought large properties, divided them into lots, then sold them for several times their original price. In addition, her late husband, Tobias Bradley, had been very involved in

the Universalist Church. Lydia Bradley paid off the \$30,000 mortgage for this church. To add to her list of good deeds, note the creation of the Bradley Home for Aged Woman in 1882-1884. Ms. Bradley gave a property to the association with the agreement that, once it was no longer used in this manner, it would promptly be returned to her. Depressingly, the home closed a few years later due to a lack of donations. Her worry and concern for the women she had been housing compelled her to pay \$5,200 dollars for their place in the new Proctor Home.

Lydia Bradley had always nurtured the dream of opening a large learning facility in honor of her departed family. When her associate Dr. Harper suggested that she turn her project into a life estate, she snatched the idea. Bradley, as was her way, demanded full control over the operation. She hand-picked every board member, teacher, and the like to make sure that everyone was up to her exceptional standards. The Bradley dedication ceremony was held on October 8, 1897. Three years later, Lydia Bradley paid off all debts on the buildings. The university's first day of school was on October 4, 1897, and it had a yearly enrollment of 6,100 students. In 1902, the school became a four-year institution. The facility changed its name from the Bradley Polytechnic Institute to Bradley University in 1946. Currently, the University celebrates its creator on Founder's Day, which is October 8, 1907.

Lydia Bradley rarely complained about her health. On December 27, 1907, Al Corcoran was ordered to Lydia Bradley's bedside. Tragically, Bradley died on January 16, 1908, at ninety-one years of age. With the exception of members of European aristocracy, Lydia Bradley most likely had more real estate under her control than any other woman in the Western Hemisphere during her time. When she passed away, all but

\$10,000 of her \$2.8 million was given to her school. Her estate would remain with the Bradley Polytechnic Institute. Bradley also provided for all descendants of her father to have free tuition at Bradley. From her creating a watchmaker school, to forming a park in honor of her deceased daughter, Lydia Moss Bradley's philanthropy reaches across almost all aspects of Peoria, Illinois. [From Lyndee Henderson, *More than Petticoats*; Joe Hitchcock, "A Women Ahead of her Time." *Illinois History* Oct. 1989; Channy Lyons, *Women of Peoria: 1620 to 1920*; and Nancy Ridgeway, "Lydia Moss Bradley: Philanthropist," *Hilltopics* 1996.]